

2 ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-13

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5 *Rowland Evans and Robert Novak*

The Contras Aren't Quitting

ON THE NICARAGUAN-HONDURAN BORDER—Anticomunist guerrillas, demonstrating they are here to stay with or without help from Washington, have responded to Sandinista shelling of border camps not by retreating deeply back into Honduras but by sending more fighters into Nicaragua permanently.

That climaxes a month seen by the outside world as piling one defeat after another on the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN): the congressional rejection was followed by Sandinista attacks on the FDN's base camps in Honduras, stirring anxiety on the part of the Honduran government. In reality, however, May was a month when guerrilla activity reached a high of 160 separate engagements—more than 100 of them deep in the Nicaraguan interior.

This comes a full year after Congress cut off the last dollar of covert CIA aid, which had been niggardly at its best. With cash from private sources and unspecified foreign governments, the FDN now claims 17,000 armed guerrillas. How much they can accomplish on a shoestring without U.S. government help has limits, but the survival of the contras is indisputable.

The notion of the destitute FDN guerrillas waiting for Red Cross handouts, under threat of extinction by Sandinista cross-border raids and about to be expelled by Honduras, is dispelled by visiting a mountain base camp on the border. Well armed (mostly with Soviet AK47s) fighting men and women are under no communist pressure. Except for danger from long-range Soviet Katyusha rockets, the camp seems impregnable.

Nevertheless, Katyusha shelling and Sandinista incursions elsewhere along the border (resulting in clashes with Honduran troops) produced the governmental demand from Tegucigalpa that the FDN move its camps deeper into the interior. CIA reports two weeks ago had contras evenly divided between Honduras and Nicaragua, prompting U.S. fears that withdrawal of over half into Honduras would cause real grief for President Robert Suazo Cordova.

The Suazo government's attitude is ambivalent. "The Hondurans show one face to the world and a friendlier face to us," an FDN official told us. Indeed, one senior Honduran officer told us the contras inside his country "represent a threat to our sovereignty and security." But in fact, the Honduran officer corps feels the true security threat comes from Nicaragua and therefore supports the FDN.

Comandante Enrique Bermudez, the FDN's military leader, last week was moving his command post from Las Vegas, near the border, to satisfy the Hondurans. But the FDN insists the CIA's 50-50 breakdown is out of date, and no more than 4,000 of 17,000 guerrillas remain in Honduras.

U.S. observers believe that is more

projection than current status, but do not deny the deepest FDN penetration ever into Nicaragua. Operating nearly 200 miles from the border, guerrillas last week cut the road leading to Bluefields on the Atlantic (temporarily capturing two towns.).

That is cause for the visibly high morale we found at the base camp. Here was no assemblage of revanchist Somocista thugs. Some 800 guerrillas passed in review before FDN political leader Indalecio Rodriguez, former president of Nicaragua's Catholic University and son of an associate of Augusto Sandino himself. "I was anti-Somoza from childhood," he told us.

Rodriguez witnessed not only a formal military parade but also political skits produced by the troops. The archvillains were not so much Sandinistas as their Cuban tutors, fitting the FDN's nationalist theme. Playing a Cuban's role was an exuberant 28-year-old furniture repairman from Managua wearing a Mohawk haircut.

A few weeks ago, he told us, "I got sick of the security police" and walked out to join the guerrillas.

We met other recruits, mostly young peasants who avoided conscription, deciding they would rather fight against the Sandinistas than for them. What the new recruits have in common is lack of weapons. Some have been awaiting rifles for months. Once some 5,000 such recruits are armed, say FDN officials, the force level will be frozen for lack of equipment.

The severance (except for informal conversations) from the CIA means the FDN is making its own decisions and surviving on its own. It cannot fairly be called an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. But an important battle of the East-West struggle is being fought out in these mountains. Moscow sustains the effort to consolidate a Marxist-Leninist state on the American mainland; Washington ignores the indigenous democratic effort to resist it.

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